DESIGN AND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN POST-INDUSTRIAL LANDSCAPES

BUSSIERE, SIMON M.
University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, bussiere@hawaii.edu

LOVELL, KERA
Purdue University, klovell@purdue.edu

1 ABSTRACT

Landworks is an experiential learning based workshop in Sardinia that annually brings together practitioners and students from across the globe to engage with remote and sensitive landscapes and to problematize the current and future standing of post-industrial sites across the Mediterranean. This is done through the production of in-situ installations over a 10-day period to highlight key cultural, ecological and economic factors, inciting debate about the nature of both existing conditions and potential future directions. This paper documents the methods and outcomes of the 2015 LW workshop that took place in the post-industrial former mining town of Agentiera.

1.1 Keywords
Design, Experiential Learning, Education, Post-Industrial, Environmental Art

The authors are solely responsible for the content of this technical presentation. The technical presentation does not necessarily reflect the official position of the Council of Educators in Landscape Architecture (CELA), and its printing and distribution does not constitute an endorsement of views which may be expressed. Citation of this work should state that it is from a CELA conference paper. EXAMPLE: Author’s Last Name, Initials. 2016. Title of Paper. Salt Lake City, Utah: CELA. For information about securing permission to reprint or reproduce, please contact CELA at thecela.org@gmail.com
INTRODUCTION

Landworks (LW) is an organization based in Sardina, Italy that uses abandoned sites of resource extraction around the Mediterranean as experiential-learning staging laboratories for landscape, architecture and environmental design students. Through 10-day summer workshops LW annually brings together 10-20 practitioners and 60-100 students from across the globe to engage with remote/sensitive landscapes and to problematize the current and future standing of post-industrial sites across the Mediterranean. This is done through the production of in-situ installations to highlight key cultural, ecological, and economic aspects that incite debate about the nature of both existing conditions and potential future directions in these particularly sensitive locations. The program’s intensive team-building projects enable students to get firsthand experience working in the field on interdisciplinary and international groups, however, with the organization still in its developing stages the constructive impact of these workshops on these communities and their environments remains debatable. This paper examines Landworks through a critical lens, unpacking the successes and failures of the 2015 Landworks workshop in Argentiera, Sardinia to engage both students and community members in the collaborative reimagining of their environment. Ultimately the paper provokes debate about short-term operational workshops as effective experiential learning tools for students as well as a constructive ideation tactic in the early stages of reconsideration or possible redesign in these complex and storied post-industrial landscapes.

ARGENTIERA

Landworks was held in Argentiera in May of 2015. Translated as “the land of silver,” Argentiera is a small, windswept village in a remote territory that caps an abandoned silver mine in the northwest corner of the Mediterranean island of Sardinia. The local memory in Argentiera is framed through post-industrial stories of both ancient and modern silver mining; the city was first a source of silver for the making of Roman coins. After an extended hiatus, the mine was reopened by a Belgian company in the nineteenth century. During this time the population swelled to an estimated 2000 inhabitants, with houses, a cinema, and Church built on the highest stretch of land overlooking the settlement. When its resources were exhausted after World War II, the mine finally closed its doors in the mid-1960s. Argentiera’s employment capacity and subsequent economic base boomed when the silver was plentiful. Like most sites of resource extraction, when the silver ran out the mining city went bust - rendering the city what some would now consider a ghost town. Like Detroit or another skeletal version of a former great industrial system, Argentiera is still alive, with a hostel, several Airbnbs, and an active beach destination during the warm summer months (figure 1). In 1997, Argentiera was recognized by UNESCO as an important site of geological and cultural heritage, and designated as part of a global network of UNESCO Geological and Mining Parks. This status, which continues to provide assistance in the remediation, recovery, and preservation of its mining structures, remains controversial. When the local government opposed UNESCO and placed the mining facility in liquidation, Regional Councilor Giampiero Pinna protested by occupying the mine for 366 days. Since 2014, the city has embarked on a multi-million-dollar waterfront project to build retaining wall and amphitheater where the beachfront ridge had begun to collapse due to repetitive storm surges. Although this current project has been framed as a necessary precaution to quell the threat of impending landslides and to ensure wheelchair access to the beach, critics have argued that the massive concrete structure now dominates the “wild nature that contributed to the unique charm of Argentiera” (La Nuova Sardegna, June 12, 2015). Taken together, when compared to its past, the village feels absent of its core economy and purpose. With that void Argentiera officials opened the dialog with Landworks on a key question: How can the community acknowledge its productive heritage, improve the ecological function of the landscape, and meet the rising demands of citizens and tourists in a synthetic and constructive balance?
Beyond its historical and environmental significance, Argentiera was selected for Landworks 2015 because its abandonment renders it a unique educational environment where students can study and explore. Far from a sterile classroom, Landworks students were witness to the clearly visible distinction between the lush green native hillsides, deep blue water and sandy beaches, and the hard, crumbling colorless surfaces left by human hands. This distinction between nature and the centuries of problematic resource extraction challenged student participants to wrestle with the role of future inhabitants and communities by reconsidering their own ability to design such places.

4 LANDWORKS

With Landworks in its fifth year of operation, Program Directors Stefan Tischer and Annacaterina Piras selected and negotiated terms and conditions for access to Argentiera. The 10-day workshop was then organized into a three short stages that culminated in a group tour and final exhibition of the team’s projects for the Argentiera community. This process can be examined through a framework of experiential learning theory, beginning with a site survey, design charrette, and project construction, along with daily evening lectures and presentations from local experts in the field and team leaders. In addition to the creation of tangible products, Landworks teams employed a fixed set of design criteria in an effort to ensure unity in intention, delivery and communication. These criteria included the following attributes: 1. Operational 2. Ephemeral 3. Low Budget 4. Respect 5. Site Specific 6. Extemporaneous 7. Participative 8. International and 9. Interdisciplinary. While largely adhering to these design qualities, final projects varied widely and captured vastly different cultural and ecological concepts in their landscape art installations.

The physically intensive and intellectually stimulating nature of this workshop provided a constructive experiential learning opportunity for the international design students – many of whom had never been able to critically and materially engage with and reimagine post-industrial landscapes firsthand. Students who participated were not only exposed to the community’s point of view, but through lectures and supplemental fieldwork led by local experts, were introduced to important economic, cultural, social and ecological issues specific to the place. Through this collection of experiences and viewpoints, students had the ability to uncover an overwhelming amount of educational and socially relevant content to work from. This process of what Stephen Temple (2011) calls “making thinking” revealed how “designing happens not simply from an inspired moment but as a result of rigorous transformative interactions between thinking and making in which concepts are discovered, transformed, and realized in concrete form.” Students at Landworks were guided to employ this type of constructionist approach through which they could engage full-scale materials in real places that enabled knowledge and experience to become concrete for the learner. However, work in the field cannot be measured by the enlightenment of students alone but must be grounded in the context to create truly resilient solutions. Ultimately, this paper reflects on the impact of Landworks on the community of Argentiera, and offers suggestions for future iterations of Landworks that might build upon this partnership to produce a coalition that will advocate for experiential design as a tool for both pedagogical and social change.
4.1 Phase One

The initial period of site survey, selection, and negotiation resulted in the building of key relationships on the ground with local agents and important constituent groups. In addition to contact with the community and local experts, students and team leaders also roamed freely throughout the site for the first two days, with groups spreading out and exploring the terrain to study its materiality and better understand the context. Teams looked for and documented hidden interesting spaces, determined significant points of spatial convergence in terms of circulation and enclosure, and sought out ways to frame views to and from these important features (Figure 2). On one particular team, these excursions were reinforced by drawing exercises that enabled students to obtain a deeper reading of the existing conditions. Students’ sketches and photographs highlighted the site’s diverse textures and materials. One team focused their early studies on the wind in an effort to highlight the significant sculpting power of its forces as described by Gyorgy Kepes as petinatta or the moment “when wind traces its impact on the sand into waves and drifts, the sand is not only a passive record of the wind’s activity; it is an active “contour” which both separates and connects the force of the wind and the resistance of the sand. It is not wind, nor is it sand; it is something new.” Interested in the opposing forces of wind and water, and trying to find a way to visualize and communicate that relationship, students created an ephemeral installation using hundreds of bright pink bougainvillea flower petals concentrated in a single ball, then dropping them in a shallow coastal pool. With time-lapse photography, students traced a pattern of movement created by the wind along the water’s surface (Figure 3). Ultimately, this initial stage familiarized students with the physical place and sparked the first moments of collaboration between teammates. As students grew more comfortable and more aware of their common surrounding, personal connections were forged through collective storytelling and shared experiences.
4.2 Phase Two

While the first stage encouraged student teams to gain a better understanding of the physical context of the site, the second phase was aimed at generating focused site-dependent experiments. Teams gathered together to share assumptions and generate dialog about their initial findings. Next, they collectively began discussing possible design and implementation strategies through drawings and working concepts. Short bursts of design thinking were evidenced by sketches and conversations between teammates and project leaders, with informal presentations of ideas shared throughout the course of two or three days. These ideas transformed into tasks that were delegated among the members of the team. Students also began building full-scale prototypes as design inquiries, shaping and making decisions about their projects directly though materials found on site. These often self-initiated and exploratory interactions with the physical site evidenced important moments of learning that proved cyclical as students collaborated with their teams to interrogate their initial assumptions and the field. Students that had traced petinatta through photographs of flowing flower petals now used reclaimed rebar as a raw material to sculpt these wind patterns on the beach (Figures 4. Having studied the site and tested materials for the first one to three days of the workshop, the teams went out en-charrette for approximately three days to quickly form sketch concepts to bring together the prototypes of their creative inquiry. This short but intense stage of idea prototyping was guided by a sense of creative urgency from the impending deadline.
4.3 Phase Three

In the final stage of the workshop, projects quickly came together across the landscape, taking on different forms and occupying a range of sites. Students were forced to consider their work in-situ and recognize how it fit together with other elements of the surrounding context. Because there is virtually no budget, they faced the challenge of gathering found materials, transporting them without the aid of heavy equipment over rugged land for later use – a process that consumed large amounts of time and energy. Several remaining days prior to the final exhibition were spent realizing the projects. Designs for these installations were kept secret to build a sense of camaraderie, mystery, and danger that, at times, functioned in stereotypically colonial terms. Students and team leaders defended their newly claimed turf while scavenging materials from the dilapidated mine, private properties, and other abandoned design experiments. Some teams drilled more deeply into social issues by emphasizing the use of oral interviews, while others drew more on internal or artistic reactions to the context through field sketching and analysis of spatial, material, and physical attributes. Despite access to the same landscape and materials, projects varied widely. Christian Phongphit’s team produced a large coastal sculpture that brought together reclaimed burnt wood from an abandoned structure with extracted stones from nearby bedrock. (Figure 5.) In contrast, Ferdinand Ludwig’s team harvested “invasive” bamboo – a new material to the site – and readapted it by constructing a hidden tower through which participants could climb and see the surrounding beachfront landscape from a completely new perspective. In different ways the divisions between nature and structure were blurred. (Figure 6.)
Figure 5: A figure stands next to this monumental installation by Chris Phongphit’s team. The project is formed from long reclaimed burnt timbers gathered nearby from an existing structure, rising from a large square platform built of found stones that were excavated during mining activities. Photo: Landworks.
Figure 6. Above: Visiting children and their teacher explore an installation by Ferdinand Ludwig and his team inside a grove of invasive bamboo, it is difficult to ascertain where the grove ends and where the new structure begins. Below: A student on Ferdinand Ludwig’s team gathers bamboo for their nearby installation. Photo: Landworks.
4.4 Exhibition

Landworks 2015 culminated in an all-day exhibition that included a group-led tour throughout the village and landscape. This event was heavily attended by local community members who comprised more than half of the spectators, including the Mayor of Sassari and local politicians, business leaders, and classes of school children. At each site, team leaders introduced their process and argument before encouraging participants to engage with the installations. Following the exhibition, visiting scholars and design critics offered an hour of benign critiques in a final ceremony that ultimately focused on honoring the contributions made by everyone, including students, team leaders, logistical support staff, chefs, videographers, and community members who volunteered their time. A noticeable absence from this ceremony were the dozens of local members of the community who had attended the exhibition and engaged with the final projects, resulting in an exclusive event that missed out on the opportunity to hear from public stakeholders. Because each work was ephemeral and lacked a direct or causal instrument for true change, speculation and experimentation were the strongest themes of the interventions with no formal solutions provided. There existed no grassroots or locally driven movement behind the program, with no significant effort at claiming power over space or in the creation of self-guided principles of design or implementation. Existing agents such as landowners and politicians controlled project direction after the installations were completed, and decided to use or simply remove the works. Because the projects were created by outsiders with little ownership or accountability from any members of the community, the projects were not intended to be maintained and quickly faded away with incoming tides. Now amongst the rubble of the dilapidated mining structures lay bits of sculpted rebar, hanging rocks from wire cable, plastic forks, and bamboo towers that remain as the material traces – the litter – of this site of design exploration.

5 CONCLUSION

While Landworks participants uncovered the site’s “working traces,” or the layered physical marks made by human hands on the land over time, this workshop also glamorized enclaves of extraction in ways that may read to some as “ruin porn.” According to Julie Bargmann (2014), “Ruin porn should be against the law. Erasure of these sites’ histories should be a felony because it robs the connection to that landscape that communities still have. Respecting those histories means respecting their generations of work. Wiping out working traces condemns the next stage of that site to be generic.” While Landworks participants did not erase the site’s histories per se, groups failed to fully draw on the site’s working traces in substantive ways that make visible possible future improvements. The project teams and their stimulating work offered no promises in terms of future commitment to the communities beyond helping recognize the potential for action. In positive terms, this resulted in highly creative works that were unburdened by numerous competing rational layers and political complexity that exist in the Mediterranean post-industrial landscape. It also regrettably resulted in few tangible constructive results beyond the temporary visual record provided by professional photography and video teams. The majority of productive outcomes were aimed at the participating students who received academic transfer credit and the opportunity to engage in a challenging international experience with leading landscape practitioners from around the globe.

Despite these problems, Landworks offers students an experiential learning opportunity and a set of tools for better understanding what is unique about a site – its cultural, economic and ecological heritage – the very qualities that distinguish it from everywhere else on earth. Improving upon this experiential learning method will facilitate a better relationship between students and the communities they should be serving. Reflections I received from student participants evidence meaningful takeaways. In particular, landscape architecture graduate student Katie Klug noted the positive impact of being immersed in and, at times, overwhelmed by the Sardinian landscape: “After experiencing this place with a curious wonder, questions of all sorts begin to accumulate – questions of history, processes, people, value, and systems. The Landworks entourage does an exceptional job of providing the answers to these questions. Local experts share their knowledge, culture, and memories of the place. The Landworks participants are flooded with information about a complex, sensitive landscape, and they must decide what the most significant aspects of this landscape are in order to make a sincere and meaningful intervention, looking toward the rich history and the dilapidated, tainted, and curious present to create some THING; some-thing that would support and make a statement about this profound place, providing a threshold between its past and future” (Klug 2015).

Today if you look past the aged bunker-like structures tucked into the verdant hills of Argentiera, you’ll find one struggling pub with a few local contractors who are repairing a sea-wall nearby, a few other
partially renovated but mostly vacant or unattended structures, and one or two modest seasonal homes peppered in above a beach. There is a nominal population of card-playing local pensioners and a few lost-looking motorists who were understandably drawn to the turquoise and grey coastal intersection in a satellite image on their smartphone or tourism website. This represents the first impression one gains after 10 days on location. However, there is a much richer and more layered story beneath the surface that students like Katie tried to capture. While a pure historic-preservationist approach may, at times, look to design a solution nostalgically based on a frozen moment in time, the intention at the core of each Landworks workshop has been to rejoin the conflicting forces of old and new at work on a fallow and latent landscape in order to create something unique and contemporary. The process of collaborative analysis, study and making is undergirded in serious debate between past and future – amplifying the dialectic between both culture and environment as dynamic systems and frameworks for the continuous process of regeneration.

6 REFERENCES


